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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - SOWING SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY IN SHAHRITUS

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Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet Distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The ambassador traveled to the Shahritus district in April to meet U.S. Government grantees who are incrementally raising the standard of living in the impoverished agricultural area. U.S. Government assistance has had a positive impact, especially in cultivating democratic decision making through community associations. The government's appreciation of these organizations will be tested when they demand loans for crops other than cotton, amendments to the tax code, or if association chairmen become so popular the government perceives them as rivals. End summary.

Democracy Coming to Tajikistan - Via Farmers Associations

¶2. (SBU) The ambassador traveled to the Shahritus district in April to meet the hukumat chairman (reported reftel) and U.S. Government grantees who are incrementally raising the standard of living in this impoverished district where agriculture is the primary industry. The residents depend on scarce water resources to survive and have by necessity joined agricultural organizations like the USAID supported Water Users' Associations where they negotiate fair water sharing policies. During a ribbon cutting ceremony at the renovated "Sayod" Water Users' Association meeting house, a woman farmer in traditional Tajik dress and head scarf told the ambassador that "Sayod" was founded to resolve water management issues, like installing water meters to monitor consumption of shared irrigation water. She said the associations were so effective at achieving a consensus in water management that members now had an effective mechanism for mobilizing the community in other efforts to improve economic conditions.

¶3. (SBU) The Minister of Land Reclamation and Water Resources emphasized the positive contributions of USAID's Water Users' Association Support Program to the country's overall economic development in a May 7 letter to the ambassador. He praised the program for training association members to collect irrigation service fees from the community of users as a first step toward sustainability. More significantly, the minister urged the extension of the program which is currently scheduled to end in 2009, to ensure the ultimate sustainability of the country's main irrigation canals in the Shahritus and Rudaki districts.

¶4. (SBU) Many non-governmental organizations are trying to help farmers transition from the Soviet style collective farm to cooperatives with consensus-based (democratic) decision making. These organizations provide information about agricultural reform and farmers' rights, and teach women skills to earn a viable income. Licensed micro-finance organizations lend money to farmers to buy livestock, to buy or repair equipment, or buy seeds for cotton and wheat. Representatives of these organizations discussed their accomplishments and challenges at a roundtable with the ambassador.

15. (SBU) The chairman of the Kabodiyon Jamoat Development Committee, an elderly man in a traditional embroidered black and white cap, thanked the ambassador for U.S. Government assistance. (Note: The Jamoat Development Committees are a UNDP-supported initiative to cultivate local self-government. The committees define community needs, set priorities, and coordinate with Tajik NGOs and international donors to implement projects.) The Kabodiyon chairman said his NGO has been supported by USAID since 2002 and in that time has provided safe drinking water to the 4,000 residents of his jamoat; built two schools with kitchens for 610 students; and renovated the maternity ward of Kabodiyon's central hospital. As an indication of the basic level of need in the area, the committee received a small grant from UNDP to finance start-up costs for factories to plump Tajik cotton mattresses that become compacted over time. With support from the UNDP they also offer low interest (18 percent) loans to farmers. (Loans from other sources can be as high as 36 percent.)

16. (SBU) The USAID supported Legal Aid Center provides legal advice about land reform and changes in the law, such as Decree 111 (Freedom to Farm), to farmers who do not know their rights and local government officials who do not know the limits of their authority. The center once arbitrated a dispute between a farm cooperative and the district chairman Kulmurod Rahmonov, who tried to appoint the head of the cooperative over the objections of the farmers. The center succeeded in getting Rahmonov to acknowledge changes in the law, which prohibits government officials from interfering in private agricultural ventures.

17. (SBU) One participant said flatly that the government Decree 111 was not working, farmers were not free to grow what they wanted, and 75-85 percent of crops were cotton because that was the only crop

DUSHANBE 00000691 002 OF 002

for which farmers could get loans. The ambassador mentioned she had raised this specific issue with Matlubkhon Davlatov, the president's advisor on economic affairs.

18. (SBU) A significant percentage of the male labor force seeks better paying jobs abroad, primarily in Russia, so women's rights advocates in Shahritus are trying to help rural women earn money to maintain their households and raise their children. Some are reaching out to isolated villages and teaching basic hygiene and pre-natal care. One community organization located near the Afghan border promotes agriculture as a business for women and offers information about agricultural reform and Decree 111. Another organization in the city of Shahritus has taught weaving and sewing to 300 women who are now working at home and selling their crafts to make a living. The organization also trains women to use computers so they can perform clerical services in offices.

19. (SBU) Comment. So far, the hukumat chairman and the Minister of Land Reclamation and Water Resources appreciate the work of the Water Users' Associations for resolving myriad parochial problems the government has neither the time nor inclination to address. However, as people increasingly turn to the associations for solutions, the associations become more essential to everyday governing. The true measure of the government's appreciation of these grass roots democracy organizations will come when the associations demand real "freedom to farm," including loans for crops other than cotton or amendments to the tax code, or if the association chairmen become so popular the government perceives them as rivals.

JACOBSON